

Permanent Mail Ballot Registrants

December 2007

Findings in Brief

- The number of California registered voters who have chosen to permanently receive their voting ballots by mail has grown in each year since this alternative first became widely available in 2002. During its inaugural year, slightly more than 1.2 million voters had signed up to permanently receive their voting ballots by mail prior to the November 2002 general election. That number has grown each year since then. As of February of this year, there were over 4.2 million voters receiving their ballots in this way, representing more than one quarter (27.2%) of the state's 15.5 million registered voters. This number is expected to continue growing in the year-long run up to the November 2008 presidential election.
- The expanding number of permanent mail ballot registrants is a major contributor to the expanding share of mail ballot votes cast in California primary elections over the past five years. Since state election laws were changed to allow this new alternative, the proportion of votes cast by mail in statewide primary elections has doubled from 23% in 2000 prior to the change to 47% in the state's last statewide primary in 2006, with permanent mail ballot voters comprising a majority of all votes cast by mail in recent state elections.
- As California's 2008 primary election approaches, the size and composition of the mail ballot voting population could have a greater impact on the overall voting patterns of each party than ever before.
- The demographic characteristics of California's permanent mail ballot registrants differ markedly from the state's overall registered voter population. Compared to the state's overall electorate, California's permanent mail ballot registrants are more likely to include voters living in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area, older voters, white non-Hispanics, and homeowners.
- Republicans outnumber Democrats among permanent mail ballot registrants 41% to 40%, while 19% are registered as declined to state or with another party. This compares to the state's overall party registration, which is 42% Democratic, 34% Republican, and 24% declined to state or other party.
- Republicans permanent mail ballot registrants tend to be older, and include more white non-Hispanics and homeowners. They are also more apt to consider themselves strongly conservative in politics and live in Northern California or the Central Valley than the overall GOP electorate.
- Democrats who are permanent mail ballot registrants also include larger proportions of older voters, white non-Hispanics, homeowners, as well as residents of the San Francisco Bay Area than their party's overall rank-and-file.

California's permanent mail ballot registrants will be able to vote well in advance of the state's February 5th presidential primary

Mail ballots will begin to be sent out to California's rapidly growing population of permanent mail ballot voters on January 7, four days after the Iowa caucuses, the nation's first presidential delegate selection contest, and the day before the New Hampshire primary, the nation's first presidential primary. Because of this, many Californians will have the opportunity to vote well in advance of the state's February 5th primary, and ahead of many other important presidential primary contests in Nevada, South Carolina, Michigan, Florida and Maine.

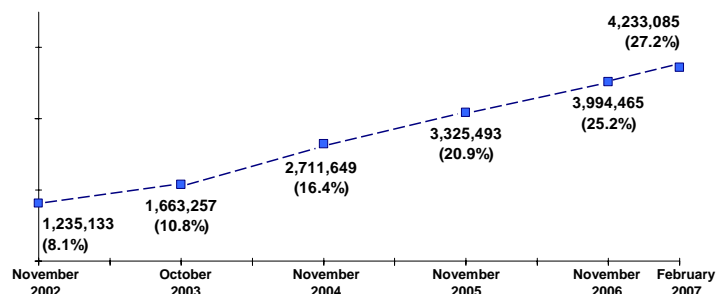
This issue of the *California Opinion Index* examines the growing proportion of Californians who, over the past five years, have become permanent mail ballot registrants. These are voters who automatically receive their election ballots by mail four weeks prior to each election, and comprise the majority of the state's mail ballot voters. Most of the data in this report are derived from a compilation of recent *Field Poll* surveys of permanent mail ballot registrants interviewed as part of its ongoing surveys of the state's voters over the past year.

Over 4.2 million voters have become permanent mail ballot registrants

Registered voters in California are increasingly signing up to permanently receive their voting ballots by mail. Since this alternative first became widely available in 2002, over 4.2 million Californians have become permanent mail ballot registrants as of February 2007, representing over one-quarter (27.2%) of the state's 15.5 million registered voters.

The growth in the number of registered voters who hold permanent mail ballot status has grown in each year since its inception. During its inaugural year, slightly more than 1.2 million voters had signed up to receive their voting ballots in this manner prior to the November election. That number has grown to over 4.2 million and is expected to continue growing during the run up to the November 2008 presidential election.

Table 1
The growth of California registered voters who are permanent mail ballot registrants



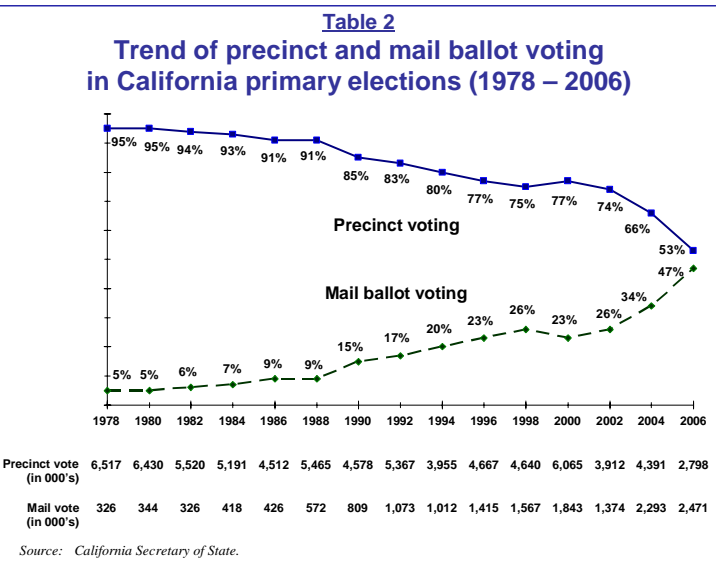
Percentages represents proportion of the state's total registered voters in each year.

Sources: 2002-2006 figures are from the California Secretary of State, while February 2007 figures are from Voter Contact Service's California voter file.

Growth in permanent mail ballot registrants tied to the spike in voting by mail over the past five years

The expanding number of registered voters who are permanent mail ballot registrants is related to the increase in the share of mail ballot votes cast in California primary elections over the past five years.

It has been almost thirty years since California changed its election laws allowing any voter the ability to cast their ballot by mail. The proportion of mail ballot votes cast in statewide primary elections grew from 5% in its first year to 23% in 2000. However, once state election laws were changed to allow any voter to become a permanent mail ballot recipient, the proportion of votes cast by mail has doubled again, from 23% to 47% at the time of the last statewide primary in 2006.



Reasons for mail voting's growing popularity

There are many reasons for the growing popularity of voting by mail in statewide elections in California. These include the following:

- Voting by mail extends the “voting window” from a 13-hour period on Election Day to a four-week period, and allows a voter to vote at his or her own pace and in a setting of his or her own choosing.
- Voting by mail enables voters to avoid precinct-related inconveniences, such as bad weather, long lines, or fears of going to an unfamiliar place to vote.
- Voting by mail provides voters with a way to cope with the increasing number of ballot propositions that voters are asked to decide. This not only affords voters more time to consider each issue, but also enables voters to refer to outside aids, such as their official voting pamphlet, campaign literature, newspaper articles, editorials, or to discuss the issues with others while in the act of voting.
- Voting by mail allows political parties, candidates, initiative campaigns, and special interest groups the ability to organize their supporters to get their vote “in the bank” prior to Election Day.

- County registrars have been increasingly encouraging mail ballot voting within their jurisdictions as way to reduce election costs.
- Growing concerns about the security of electronic voting machines have made the old-fashioned mail ballot a more attractive option, since it provides a paper trail of each ballot cast.

Permanent mail ballot registrants differ from the state's overall electorate

A compilation of data from recent *Field Poll* surveys of the state's registered voters conducted over the past twelve months shows that the demographic characteristics of California's permanent mail ballot registrants differ markedly from the state's overall voting population.

- Permanent mail ballot registrants include more registered Republicans than are found in the overall electorate. Among permanent mail ballot registrants 41% are registered Republicans, 40% are registered Democrats and 19% are registered as declined to state or with another party. This compares to the state's overall party distribution of 42% registered Democrats, 34% registered Republicans and 24% registered as declined to state or with another party.
- Permanent mail ballot registrants include proportionately more registrants living in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area and significantly fewer voters living in Los Angeles County. For example, 29% of permanent mail ballot registrants live in the Bay Area compared to 21% of all voters statewide. While 25% of all voters statewide live in Los Angeles County, just one in ten permanent mail ballot registrants (10%) reside in that county. Because Democrats outnumber Republicans nearly two to one on the Los Angeles County registration rolls, the significantly smaller share of the state's permanent mail ballot registrants in Los Angeles County is a major factor contributing to the lower proportion of Democrats than Republicans among permanent mail ballot registrants statewide.
- Permanent mail ballot registrants include a larger proportion of voters age 65 or older and fewer voters under age 50 than the overall electorate. Over three in ten permanent mail ballot registrants (31%) are age 65 or older compared to 19% among the state's total registered voter population. While a majority (53%) of the electorate is under age 50, just 39% of permanent mail ballot registrants are of this age.
- Permanent mail ballot registrants include a proportionately greater number of white non-Hispanic and fewer Latino voters than the overall electorate. Three in four permanent mail ballot registrants (75%) are white non-Hispanic compared to 66% in the overall electorate. Conversely, just 13% of permanent mail ballot registrants are Latino compared to 21% among the state's total registered voter population.
- Permanent mail ballot registrants include proportionately more homeowners and fewer renters than the overall electorate. Statewide, three in four mail ballot registrants (75%) are homeowners and just 25% are renters. Among all voters statewide 68% are homeowners and 32% are renters.

Table 3
Comparing the characteristics of permanent mail registrants to the overall registered voter population in California

	Total registered voters	Permanent mail registrants	Δ
Party registration			
Democrats	42%	40%	-2
Republicans	34	41	+7
Non-Partisans/others	24	19	-5
Region			
Los Angeles County	25%	10%	-15
Orange County	10	11	+1
San Diego County	9	8	-1
Other Southern California	14	15	+1
Central Valley	16	20	+4
San Francisco Bay Area	21	29	+8
Other Northern California	5	7	+2
Gender			
Male	47%	44%	-3
Female	53	56	+3
Age			
18 – 29	17%	11%	-6
30 – 39	17	13	-4
40 – 49	19	15	-4
50 – 64	28	30	+2
65 or older	19	31	+12
Race/ethnicity			
White non-Hispanic	66%	75%	+9
Latino	21	13	-8
Black/African-American	5	4	-1
Asian/other	8	8	---
Political ideology			
Strongly conservative	18%	21%	+3
Moderately conservative	12	11	-1
Middle-of-the-road/other	46	44	-2
Moderately liberal	10	9	-1
Strongly liberal	14	15	+1
Education			
High school or less	24%	21%	-3
Some college/trade school	34	35	+1
College graduate	22	22	---
Post-graduate work	20	22	+2
Household income			
Under \$20,000	12%	11%	-1
\$20,000 – \$39,999	18	17	-1
\$40,000 – \$59,999	18	19	+1
\$60,000 – \$79,999	15	14	-1
\$80,000 or more	37	39	+2
Tenure			
Homeowner	68%	75%	+7
Renter	32	25	-7
Marital status			
Married/living together	64%	65%	+1
Separated/divorced	8	8	---
Widow	6	10	+4
Never married	22	17	-5
Religion			
Protestant	39%	41%	+2
Catholic	26	24	-2
Other religions	17	17	---
No preference	18	18	---

Source: Field Poll estimates based on interviews with 4,523 registered voters conducted December 2006 – October 2007, of whom 1,374 were permanent mail ballot registrants. Party registration and regional percentages were derived from Voter Contact Service's California Voter file.

Democratic permanent mail ballot registrants are older and include more white non-Hispanics and Bay Area residents

Los Angeles County Democrats outnumber Democrats in the Bay Area by a 30% to 24% margin among the party's overall rank-and-file. But, among Democrats who are permanent mail ballot registrants Bay Area voters outnumber L.A. voters, 36% to 10%.

A third (34%) of Democratic permanent mail ballot registrants are age 65 or older, compared to 21% among all Democrats.

While the state's Democratic rank-and-file are composed of about half white non-Hispanic voters (55%), among the party's permanent mail ballot voters nearly seven in ten (69%) are white non-Hispanic. Latino voters comprise over one in four of the state's registered Democrats (27%), but include just 17% of the party's permanent mail ballot registrants.

Table 4
Comparing Democratic permanent mail voters to the overall Democratic voter population in California

	Total Democrats	Permanent mail registrants	Δ
Region			
Los Angeles County	30%	10%	-20
Orange County	7	8	+1
San Diego County	7	7	---
Other Southern California	12	13	+1
Central Valley	15	18	+3
San Francisco Bay Area	24	36	+12
Other Northern California	5	8	+3
Gender			
Male	42%	42%	---
Female	58	58	---
Age			
18 – 29	15%	10%	-5
30 – 39	16	12	-4
40 – 49	17	12	-5
50 – 64	31	32	+1
65 or older	21	34	+13
Race/ethnicity			
White non-Hispanic	55%	69%	+14
Latino	27	17	-10
Black/African-America	9	6	-3
Asian/Other	9	8	-1
Political ideology			
Strongly conservative	6%	6%	---
Moderately conservative	7	6	-1
Middle-of-the-road/other	48	46	-2
Moderately liberal	15	15	---
Strongly liberal	24	27	+3
Education			
High school or less	26%	25%	-1
Some college/trade school	33	33	---
College graduate	20	19	-1
Post-graduate work	21	23	+2
Marital status			
Married/living together	62%	61%	-1
Separated/divorced	10	9	-1
Widow	7	12	+5
Never married	21	18	-3
Tenure			
Homeowner	68%	76%	+8
Renter	32	24	-8

Source: Field Poll estimates based on interviews with 1,970 registered Democrats conducted December 2006 – October 2007, of whom 602 were permanent mail ballot registrants.

GOP permanent mail ballot registrants are older, include more white non-Hispanics, homeowners, and strong conservatives than the Republican rank-and-file

California Republicans who are permanent mail ballot registrants include larger proportions of older voters, white non-Hispanics and homeowners than are found in their party's overall rank-and-file. In addition, more of these voters consider themselves strongly conservative in politics and live in Northern California or the Central Valley than among the overall GOP electorate.

A comparison of Republicans who are permanent mail ballot registrants to the state's overall GOP rank-and-file reveals these differences:

- About two in three (65%) Republicans who are permanent mail ballot registrant are age 50 or older compared to 51% in the overall electorate.
- Greater than eight in ten Republican permanent mail ballot registrants (85%) are white non-Hispanic, compared to 77% GOP voters statewide.
- Greater than eight in ten (85%) GOP permanent mail ballot voters are homeowners compared to 78% among all Republican voters statewide.
- The proportion of GOP permanent mail ballot registrants who consider themselves strongly conservative in politics (43%) is also greater than its share in the overall GOP electorate (39%).
- Nearly half (48%) of Republicans who are permanent mail ballot registrants live in Northern California or the Central Valley, while only 12% live in Los Angeles County. The comparable proportions among the overall GOP electorate are 39% and 20%, respectively.

About the Findings

The findings in this report come from a compilation of statewide surveys of California registered voters conducted by *The Field Poll*. All interviewing was conducted by telephone in English and Spanish between the period December 2006 – October 2007. Up to eight attempts were made in each survey to reach and interview each randomly selected voter on different days and times of day during each interviewing period.

Interviews were conducted with a total of 4,523 registered voters, of whom 1,374 were permanent mail ballot registrants. The Democratic voter sample included interviews with 1,970 registered Democrats, of whom 602 were permanent mail ballot registrants. The Republican voter sample included interviews with 1,672 registered Republicans, of whom 576 were permanent mail ballot registrants.

Each survey's sample was developed from telephone listings of individual voters selected from a statewide list of registered voters in California. The sample list itself indicates the voter's name, party registration, county of residence and whether or not the voter is a permanent mail ballot registrant.

Sampling error estimates applicable to any probability-based survey depend on sample sizes. According to statistical theory, 95% of the time results from the overall statewide sample of 4,523 registered voters are subject to a sampling error of +/- 1.5 percentage points, while findings from the statewide sample of permanent mail ballot registrants have a sampling or +/- 3.1 percentage points.

Table 5
Comparing Republican permanent mail voters to the overall Republican voter population in California

<u>Region</u>	<u>Total Republicans</u>	<u>Permanent mail registrants</u>	<u>Δ</u>
<u>Region</u>			
Los Angeles County	20%	11%	-9
Orange County	14	14	---
San Diego County	10	9	-1
Other Southern California	17	18	+1
Central Valley	20	23	+3
San Francisco Bay Area	14	18	+4
Other Northern California	5	7	+2
<u>Gender</u>			
Male	50%	49%	-1
Female	50	51	+1
<u>Age</u>			
18 – 29	13%	7%	-6
30 – 39	15	13	-2
40 – 49	21	15	-6
50 – 64	28	32	+4
65 or older	23	33	+10
<u>Race/ethnicity</u>			
White non-Hispanic	77%	85%	+8
Latino	13	6	-7
Black/African-American	2	2	---
Asian/Other	8	7	-1
<u>Political ideology</u>			
Strongly conservative	39%	43%	+4
Moderately conservative	19	19	---
Middle-of-the-road/other	37	37	---
Moderately liberal	3	1	-2
Strongly liberal	2	*	-2
<u>Education</u>			
High school or less	21%	18%	-3
Some college/trade school	36	38	+2
College graduate	22	25	+3
Post-graduate work	21	19	-2
<u>Household income</u>			
Less than \$20,000	8%	6%	-2
\$20,000 – \$39,999	14	15	+1
\$40,000 – \$59,999	18	20	+2
\$60,000 – \$79,999	16	14	-2
\$80,000 or more	44	45	+1
<u>Tenure</u>			
Homeowner	78%	85%	+7
Renter	22	15	-7
<u>Marital status</u>			
Married/living together	72%	72%	---
Separated/divorced	7	8	+1
Widow	7	10	+3
Never married	14	10	-4
<u>Religion</u>			
Protestant	56%	57%	-1
Catholic	21	21	---
Other religions	12	12	---
No preference	11	10	-1
<u>Born-again Christian</u>			
Yes	35%	35%	---
No	65	65	---

* Less than 1/2 of 1%.

Source: Field Poll estimates based on interviews with 1,672 registered Republicans conducted December 2006 – October 2007, of whom 576 were permanent mail ballot voters.